Room for improvement

BEARD, Colin <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3836-3072> and PRICE, Ilfryn

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

http://shura.shu.ac.uk/7031/

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Published version

BEARD, Colin and PRICE, Ilfryn (2013). Room for improvement. RSA Journal, 159 (5553), 38-41.

Copyright and re-use policy

See http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Some businesses have begun to make space work for their staff, while others are stuck in a different age

By Colin Beard FRSA and Ilfryn Price

In his classic 1964 novel, *Corridors of Power*, CP Snow dealt with decision making in and around government. The spatial metaphor he spawned still resonates today, even as policymakers encourage working without, or beyond, Whitehall's walls for reasons of effectiveness, as well as efficiency.

Snow actually paints a more subtle picture. Although senior mandarins occasionally engage in ritual exercises to determine whose office will host what meeting, real power is exercised, or fails to be exercised, in a rich variety of conversations: formal meetings, social gatherings, learned societies and country mansions. Decisions emerge from a web of interactions.

Some modern workplaces do something similar and encourage a rich ecology of conversations in different settings. But many do not. They still have open plans and cube farms, with ranks of desks drawn up like Roman legions preparing for battle. In higher education and the NHS in particular, the actual corridors linger on. Many of today's workers are still shackled to fixed and wasteful workstations. Why?

A modern university campus offers a clue. Many libraries have evolved into learning centres, supporting multiple modes of individual and group study in spaces that are only occupied at the learner's discretion. Some of these can be booked, some are there to be accessed informally. Learning is facilitated by individual reflection and social interaction. In contrast, many teaching spaces retain linear designs. Ranks of students are drawn up like troops before the commanding officer. Space is planned and allocated for instruction.

COLIN BEARD FRSA IS A SPECIALIST IN HUMAN LEARNING AND A TEACHING FELLOW AT SHEFFIELD BUSINESS SCHOOL. ILFRYN PRICE HAS BEEN RESEARCHING, TEACHING AND WRITING ABOUT CHANGE AND SPACE SINCE 1993

The distinction is potentially fundamental. Today's economy demands both learning and the most effective use of resources. Firms seek human capital, networking and agility as well as reduced overheads, yet many still plan and allocate space in ways that discourage learning and consume more resources. It is as if places for learning and working remain separate. This comparison might seem simple, yet it is deeply rooted in our perceptions of employment and the workplace. A short history makes the point.

Early in the 20th century, behaviourist thinking, associated with operant conditioning – a type of learning in which an individual's behaviour is modified by its consequences – and the work of Ivan Pavlov and BF Skinner, dominated. Operant conditioning, matched by Frederick Taylor's scientific management, was manifest in the offices of the time. Frank Lloyd Wright's 1903 Larkin Administration Building is often cited as the archetype of this approach with its overtones of the Panopticon and the supervisor gazing down on the rows of workers arranged as manual and stationary automata. It is space that easily equates with a behaviouralist view of learning. Substitute students for workers and you have the modern lecture theatre.

Approaches to learning gradually changed as cognitivist theories began to surface in the late 1950s, culminating in Benjamin Bloom's spatial hierarchy of thinking or cognition. Seeing the 'human' as unique, intelligent and rational, the cognitive focus stressed thinking, remembering and analysing as computational processing through which people sought to understand their worlds.

At much the same time, the coincidence of economic revival, construction technology and reliable lift systems enabled the creation of taller office buildings. Managerial

>>

PHOTOGRAPHY: FERNANDO ALDA

“MANY OF TODAY’S WORKERS ARE STILL SHACKLED TO FIXED AND WASTEFUL WORKSTATIONS”

and supervisory offices grew in size and evolved into finely demarcated symbols of status along the line of Snow’s Corridors of Power. The post-war period saw the rise of professionals – cognitive workers – and their need, or demand, for their own offices. The Shell Centre on the South Bank in London is an early example. Here, the desk was still the managerial or professional workstation across which paper flowed from in-tray to out-tray and on which sat the telephone. Although more individuals escaped direct observation by the commander, each room’s size and fittings were strictly controlled. Those of sufficient status or power had chairs for visitors and only for the real upper echelons did the office include a more informal meeting area, usually modelled on a coffee table and easy chairs. Autonomy was for the few.

By the late 1960s, humanist theories were emphasising human agency and the fulfilment of human potential. Carl Rogers’ seminal text, *Freedom to Learn*, introduced a liberating metaphor. For a therapist like Rogers, acceptance, the acknowledgement of feelings and nurturing were central to learning. Individuals, if treated in the right way, had it within themselves to work towards solving problems. These ideas were instrumental in the early development of student centeredness.

The decade of *Freedom to Learn* also saw the appearance of *burolandschaft*. Pioneering German consultants Wolfgang and Eberhard Schelle argued for freer information flow, increased openness and equality, as well as what might now be seen as faster organisational learning. Irregular arrangements of desks displaced straight lines, although the rectangular desk remained the basic work unit. Their concept became fashionable and had reached America by 1967, but – in its US manifestations at least – landscaped offices retained the nuancing of status by desk size and furniture. Designer Robert Propst had similar ideas in mind when he launched the ‘action office’ in 1968, but it degenerated into today’s cube farms.

Since Rogers, cultural and social contexts have gained increasing recognition. A range of social constructivist theories posited learning as active and contextualised. Learners were seen as constructing knowledge not only for themselves as individuals, but also through social interaction. While such theories remain influential, they are now positioned among a milieu of views about human learning, such as psychoanalytic theories, multiple intelligences, advances in neuroscience and, particularly significant to our argument here, a widening recognition of the role of the body (embodiment) in learning. Interestingly, corporeal metaphors are embedded in everyday descriptions of cognitive processes: to grasp a concept, to scratch the surface, or step-by-step logic.

Variety and social interaction crept back into some corporate offices in the 1980s. Streets became fashionable, as used in Stockholm’s Scandinavian Airlines Headquarters, completed in 1988, though being seen having a coffee or walking in them was often regarded as not working and being away from one’s station. Monolithic organisations found moulds hard to break. Tom Peters, writing in 1992 under the banner of *Liberation Management*, recognised interaction when he described space management as “the most ignored – and most powerful – tool for inducing culture change, speeding up innovation projects and enhancing the learning process in far-flung organisations. While we fret ceaselessly about facilities issues such as office square footage allotted to various ranks, we all but ignore the key strategic issue: the parameters of intermingling.”

At much the same time, Cornell’s Franklin Becker advanced similar arguments and coined the metaphor of ‘organisational ecology’ to portray the complex mix of people, technology and physical space in the developing workplace. Theory had moved on. Technology had begun to be mobile. Practice and accepted wisdom lagged. Writing about office designs in the 1990s, design expert Jeremy Myerson contrasted modernisers trying to use new space in old cultures from mould breakers with new ideas and new spaces. One of the mould breakers, London-based advertising agency St Luke’s, was described in *Harvard Business Review* as possibly the world’s scariest company. Google had not yet surfaced and conventional wisdom had written off Apple in favour of Microsoft.

The understanding of human learning has shifted from animalistic simplicity – rooted in behavioural observation, predictability and control – toward an increased awareness that human dynamics are complex. This view, using ecological metaphors, suggests an adaptive collection of overlapping communities of interest that are open and dynamic, diverse and partially self-organising, and in constant evolution. Most surprising is the extent to which a very similar history could be seen in how office spaces have adapted over time.

Peters was ahead of his time but, wherever case studies have been performed, intermingling, the benefits of interaction and the drawbacks of interruptions emerge as the most positive and most negative factors on users’ perceptions of their productivity. Learning centres provide both, with the user free to choose. Instruction centres and workstations don’t; someone else does the choosing.

What is surprising is how fast the ecology has shifted. Jeremy Myerson, revisiting office history in 2012, pointed out that many of his 1990s mould breakers had become today’s global giants. They have offices that resemble university learning centres, though other organisations have also managed this. Some, such as the Government Communications Headquarters in Gloucestershire, have rediscovered the streets concept. Others devote space to social attractors that combine catering and brand expression to draw people into a range of conversations.

Elsewhere, it appears that designs from the behaviouralist era linger on, either in linear ‘one-way’ lecture theatres and classrooms, or in rectilinear workplace open plans with space allocated according to status, alongside a corridor. Why do some organisations remain stuck, unable to make the important transition towards autonomous complexity, rather than pre-planned, behaviouralist conformity?

In an interview given shortly before he died, Propst made the point that “not all organisations are intelligent and progressive”. These companies, he went on, make “little bitty cubicles and stuff people in them. Barren, rat-hole places.” Many who commission new offices still think of stuffing in as many individual workstations as the floor plate will carry. In contrast, former US Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill said in 1999 of his time as CEO of Alcoa: “Having successfully implemented a move to an open-design concept where everyone including me has the same workspace, we have seen wonderful changes in terms of culture and quality of work. The entire building is our office.”

This quote illustrates two points that are of great significance to the future of working and learning spaces. First is the removal of overt physical symbolism of power and status. Second is the move away from the emphasis on individual space and the explicit recognition that the totality of the building is there for all; the learning centre rather than the classroom. This second point opens up new possibilities for space trading, both within the existing building footprint and, potentially, beyond. It is the model evolved from libraries rather than from the Larkin Administration Building. The library narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has focused on instruction and control. It has found an unwitting ally in the still-dominant narrative of facilities management, which focuses on unit cost.

Space, as an ignored but powerful management tool, is still not found on the educational curricula that prepare most managers or, indeed, most teachers. Academic critics, when they consider physical spaces, are prone to dismiss all modern examples as a continual expression of managerial power; indeed many occupy offices and teach in spaces that embody such power. Of course, they are often right, but some more recent approaches do grant greater autonomy to the individual.

One example is ECHQ in London, the global headquarters of the property consultancy EC Harris, occupied in 2006. The design allocates 20% of the available space to a semi-public, front-of-house open area, with clever but discreet security. Backstage, 545 ‘stations’ provide 900 people with spaces to sit at as they need to, along with smaller, less public interactive areas and a variety of bookable spaces. The space reproduces the look and feel of the *burolandschaft*. The whole project is credited with dramatic increases in profitability, staff satisfaction and knowledge generation. Because it supports more people from a given size of space, it also delivers a significant reduction in total cost and CO_2 emissions per head.

It is not just the dramatic difference in space allocated to interaction and bookable concentration that is important here. It is also the permeability and openness of the front-of-house space. If this were to be replicated in collaboration with other businesses in, for example, a city environment, there would exist – possibly for the first time – a complex ecology of spaces and places, providing an elastic network of home and ‘away’ spaces to work and learn.

They would exist beyond organisations’ current walls and beyond self-ownership. Such a web-like network could prove to be an exciting opportunity for the future, where such spaces would enable learning and knowledge creation in a rapidly changing world. ■

FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION

NEW ENDINGS

Wiard Sterk FRSA received Catalyst funding for his project to map dead-end streets and bring them back to life. In residential areas of UK towns and cities, many street ends have been blocked off as a traffic-calming measure. Many have become ‘dead’ spaces, populated by concrete bollards.

The New Endings project identified these areas in Wiard’s home of Grangetown, Cardiff. Working with architect Kevin Hong FRSA, Mhairi McVicar FRSA and the Welsh School of Architecture, more than 30 locations were identified in Grangetown alone. “We wanted to give these places purpose,” Wiard said. “By working with the communities in these streets, we can give the endings some identity.” The Fellows involved are setting up a partnership between Cardiff University and the city council to implement these ideas over a ten-year period.